

1749

THE
ABSURDITY and BLASPHEMY
Of depretiating
MORAL VIRTUE:
A
S E R M O N

Preached at the WEST-CHURCH

I N
B O S T O N,

June 18th. 1749.

By *Lemuel Briant*, A. M. A

Pastor of the first CHURCH in Braintree.

I JOHN iii. 7, 8.--- *Let no Man deceive you ; he that doeth Righteousness is righteous.--- He that committeth Sin is of the Devil.---*

I TIM. iv. 11, 12. *These Things command and teach. Let no Man despise thy Youth.---*

CHAP. vi. 3, 4. *If any Man teach otherwise and consent not to wholesome Words, even the Words of our LORD JESUS CHRIST, and to the Doctrine which is according to Godliness ; he is proud knowing Nothing, &c.*

B O S T O N :
Printed by J. GREEN for D. GOOKIN, in Marlborough-
Street. 1749.

Of describing

MORAL VIRTUE

A

MEMORANDUM

Preached at the West-Church



My Laurel Brint, A.

John W. D. ...
...
Tim. iv. 12. ...
...
Chap. vi. 8. ...
...
...
A more ...



The Absurdity and Blasphemy

O F

Depretiating *Moral Virtue.*



ISAIAH LXIV. 6.

---*All our Righteousnesses are as filthy Rags.*



S we profess to believe (and undoubtedly are *Orthodox* in this Point at least) that the Scriptures are the only Rule of Faith and Manners ; so it naturally follows from this Concession, that it is of the last Importance to every Man that expects finally to be judged by *this Word*, rightly to understand and

6 *The Absurdity and Blasphemy*

and faithfully apply to practise the Truths it contains. And as those who sustain the Character of *Teachers* in the Christian Church, have in a special Manner the Oracles of God committed unto them, and are under special Obligations to search the Scriptures daily, to give themselves to Study, Meditation and Prayer, in order to find out the true Sense of every Passage they minister to their People; so when in the diligent Use of such Means as they are furnished with, they have made up Judgment upon the Text under Consideration, they will (if they are honest Men) with all Openness declare their Sentiments, and by the Force of right Reasoning endeavour to propagate them, wherever the Providence of God occasionally calls them, as well as in their more stated Sphere of Action.

CERTAIN it is, that the Word of God (as the best Things are liable to Corruption and the Corruption of the best is the worst) has either thro' the Weakness, Inattention and Ignorance, or more criminal Designs of its Expositors, (by some such I say,) in all Ages of the World been wretchedly abused to serve the Purposes of Error, Superstition and Vice. And perhaps nothing has had a more fatal Tendency to delude the Simple and harden the Profane, than judging of Scripture Doctrines from particular Scraps of Scripture, and from the bare jingle of Words, without attending to the general Drift and Design of the Author, and the whole Current of Inspiration as to the Point under Examination.

HENCE

HENCE it has come to pass that when Men read of God's choosing whole Nations to certain Privileges (and those in this Life only) they have rashly concluded that *particular Persons* are *unconditionally* chosen to eternal Life hereafter.---That when they have laid before them the Character of a very loose and abandoned People, who by their *own* long practised Wickedness, have rendered themselves the Children of Wrath, and fitted themselves for Destruction, they are induced to vilify humane Nature itself with the same vicious Character.---That when they hear of our being *saved by Grace*, they conceive of it so as to destroy all moral Agency, and set themselves down with this vain Thought, that nothing on their Part is necessary to Salvation, but if they are designed for it, they shall *irresistably* be driven into Heaven, whether they will or not.---And if they are not, no Prayers, nor Endeavours will avail.---And finally ; when they meditate on the constant unchangeable Affection God bears to *good Men*, they make this groundless Inference from his Unchangeableness, that they are unchangeable also.

THUS “ stupified and bewildered with Sounds, without attending to the true Sense of Revelation,” the pure and perfect Religion of Jesus, (which contains the most refined System of Morality the World was ever blessed with ; which every where considers us as moral Agents, and suspends our whole Happiness upon our *personal* good Behaviour, and our patient *Continuance* in the Ways of Well-doing) is in many Places turned into an *idle Speculation*,

8 *The Absurdity and Blasphemy*

lation, a mysterious Faith, a senseless Superstition, and a groundless Recumbency ; and in short, every Thing but what in Fact it is, viz. a Doctrine of Sobriety, Righteousness and Piety.

THE like Delusions, and by the same Means have been introduced in judging of our spiritual State.

SOME (and those not a few) are full of Hope in God. Because as they imagine he has from all Eternity, and that not only without any Reason, but in direct Opposition to the very Nature and essential Constitution of his moral Government, *set his Love upon them.*---- Others you will find amusing themselves with a vain and groundless (*however no Matter since 'tis a strong*) Perswasion that there is no Need of their being righteous themselves, because they have the perfect Righteousness of Christ imputed unto them : But if they should happen to think any Thing is required of them, they will be sure to fix their Duty in some Thing of very cheap and easy Performance, many Degrees short of actual, and much more universal Goodness.----As in an affected Sorrow and groaning for Sin, especially for the Sins of *others* they never had any Hand in, without any Reformation of themselves.-----Or in an high Pretense to a peculiar Spirit of Devotion and superlative Intimacy with Heaven, when perhaps in common Life, they deify their Lusts and Passions, and by their sensual, covetous and ambitious Designs evidence to all about them, this World is all the God they adore ; that like

of depreciating MORAL VIRTUE. 9

like true *Saints* they love it with all their Heart and Soul; seek it with all their Mind and Strength; and (let the Call of God for the support of Truth and Virtue, or relief of the Distressed be ever so loud) had rather part with their last Drop of their Heart's Blood, than one Atom of their Interest in it.---The Solemnities of a Fast-Day in particular (*) your *Saints* that depend on their devotional Exercises not only prefer to all other Duties, but are ready to imagine they are sufficient Atonement for all their past Vices, and of greater Account to procure the Blessing of Heaven, than all the *Heathenish Morality* the *abominable good Works* that can be preached by all your *legal self-righteous Men* on Earth.

AND (not to forget my Text) no Passage perhaps in the whole Book of God has been more shamefully perverted to the propagating of such Libertine Notions than this I have now chosen to discourse upon. The Words, as they are commonly received, are a standing Reflection on all Virtue and good Manners; the most effectual Discouragement that could be given to the Practice of Christian Morality, and consequently one of the most fatal Snares that could be laid for the Souls of Men. The common Notion of them is, that the Prophet is here giving us a just and literal Description of the Righteousness of the best, while he is only confessing and lamenting the aggravated

(*) Preached the next Sabbath after a publick Fast.

B

Sins

10 *The Absurdity and Blasphemy*

Sins of the worst of Men. From hence, this odious Character has been transferred to the moral Attainments of Men under the Gospel; and the best Righteousness of the most improved Christians hath been generally spoken of, as no better a Qualification (even according to the merciful Tenour of the Gospel, and considered as the Condition of that final Happiness which is in the Hands and at the Disposal of Jesus Christ, who according to the good Pleasure of the supreme Father of all is constituted the only Mediator between God and Man) no better a Qualification, I say, even in this mediatorial and infinitely gracious Scheme, to appear before God with Acceptance, than filthy Rags are to dress and adorn the Body for a Visit to the King and Court on Earth.

BUT the true Sense of the Words (as I trust will appear in the Progress of this Discourse) is not, that their Righteousness would have been as *filthy Rags*, if they had really been a righteous People: (The sacred Writer suggests no such Thing,) But his whole Design is to shew that they had no real true Righteousness, being, as to their general Character, of a corrupt Heart and polluted Life, or as 'tis said in the former Part of the Verse, *all of them as an unclean Thing*.

IT must therefore, be a Matter of great Importance, a Design richly worth our Undertaking to deliver the Text (which is the Business of the present Discourse) from this false Gloss, this horrid Abuse that has been put upon it; and demonstrate

to

of depreiating MORAL VIRTUE. II

to the contrary, (as may very easily be done) that neither all, nor any part of *our* Righteousness when true and genuine, sincere and universal, can possibly, consistent with Reason, Revelation, or indeed so much as common Sense, deserve this odious Character of *filthy Rags*. And in Prosecution of this Design; let us with honest, sincere and upright Minds; in meekness of Wisdom and in real Love to the Truth wherever we find it, attend to these three Particulars, which I shall lay down as the Ground-Work of the whole Argument.

Ist. We will consider what was the true State and Character of this People the Prophet here speaks of, and the special Grounds of his saying (as in the Text) that *all their Righteousnesses were as filthy Rags*.

IIdly. We will advance some further Arguments to prove this is not nor ever was designed to be a just Character of the *personal* Righteousness of truly good and holy Men.

IIIdly, and lastly, Point out to you some of the dangerous Consequences of admitting this Sense of the Text.

Ist. We are to consider what was the true State and Character of this People, &c.

WHOEVER consults not only our Context, but other Parts of this Book, will find that the People of the Jews were at this Time sunk into a

wretched State of Degeneracy, even beyond their common Character, which was always, at the best, full bad enough : And in Consequence of their general, extraordinary Wickedness, were under the signal Frowns of Heaven ; that the Drift and Design of the Prophet's Discourse is not to depreciate true Righteousness ; not to warn them against placing any Dependence on it ; but to convince them that they were utterly destitute of it, and therefore must expect God's Hand would still be stretched out against them, unless they mended their Manners. He says expressly in the preceding Verse that it would have been well with them if they had been truly righteous, and attributes all their present Sufferings to the present Corruption of Manners among them. *Thou meetest him that rejoiceth, and worketh Righteousness, those that remember thee in thy Ways (*)* : This would have been their happy Case if they had been such manner of Persons : But as it follows, *Behold thou art Wrath, for we have sinned.*

THE same Character for Substance (with this in our Text) is given of them in the 1st Chap. 4 Ver. &c. *Ab ! sinful Nation, a People laden with Iniquity, a Seed of evil doers, &c.* And because their State was so bad the Prophet received those Orders in the 58th Chap. 1st Verse, *To cry aloud, and spare not ; to lift up his Voice like a Trumpet, and shew this People their Transgression, and the*

(*) Verse 5.

House

House of Jacob their Sin. And for the same Reason he expresses such a mighty Zeal against the Vices of the Times, in the 62d Chap. 1st Verse, *For Zion's sake I will not hold my Peace, and for Jerusalem's sake I will not rest, until the Righteousness thereof go forth as Brightness, and the Salvation thereof as a Lamp that burneth.*

It is true we read in this Book, of their making great Pretences to Religion, and of their Excess in the external ritual Parts of it; of their abounding in extraordinary Assemblies, offering a multitude of Sacrifices, making many and long Prayers, in so much that the Almighty declares (speaking after the manner of Men) that he was troubled and quite worried out with them. And well he might, considering he is a Being of purer Eyes than to behold Iniquity, for amidst all this splended Form of Godliness, they had no more true Goodness in them than the Scribes and Pharisees in our Saviour's Day on Earth; but like them were utterly averse to Duty and Obedience, and given up to the most detestable Immoralities. *Their Hands were defiled with Blood, and their Tongues with Iniquity, their Lips speak Lies, their Tongues muttered Perverseness.* (†) Yea, they persisted in transgressing, and lying against the Lord, and in departing from their God, speaking Oppression and revolt, conceiving and uttering from the Heart Words of falsehood. *Judgment was turned away backward, and justice*

(†) 59th Chap. 3d ver.

14 *The Absurdity and Blasphemy*

stood afar off: Truth was fallen in the Street, and Equity could not enter, &c. (||)

I will only add that all their crying Abominations were committed among them under the greatest Aggravations, while they enjoyed superiour Advantages of excelling in Virtue; while they had the constant Instructions and Warnings of God's Prophets to the contrary; while God by a variety of signal Providences both merciful and afflictive, endeavoured to engage them in their Duty and Obedience; Finally, while they themselves pretended to be the most precise People under Heaven: So that in fact they made their Religion a Cloak for their Immoralities, and imagined all was well, that they were very pious good People tho' they Lied, Stole, committed Adultery, Swore falsely, and in short, in common Life practice all manner of Villany, so long as they could say, (which was the common Cant of the Times,) *The Temple of the Lord, the Temple of the Lord, the Temple of the Lord are we.*

No marvel then, if this be a just Representation of their Case, (and whoever consults the sacred History will find them vastly worse, rather than any ways injured by this Character;) if their moral Character, I say, was at least as bad as I have represented it, no Man can wonder that the Prophet says (nor be at any loss to determine his

(||) 13 ver. &c.

meaning

meaning when he says) *all their Righteousnesses were as filthy Rags.* And thus much for the 1st Head to shew, what was the true State, &c. And so I come

II^{dly}. To advance some further Arguments to prove this is not, nor ever was designed to be a just Character of the *personal* Righteousness of truly good and holy Men.

And here let me say,

1st. THIS is directly opposite to the whole current of Scripture Language. Search the Bible from the beginning to the end of it, and you will never find any the least and most imperfect Degrees of real Goodness banded with any such odious Character. But on the contrary 'tis evident to every one that reads the Scripture with Understanding, and worthy particular Remark that when the sacred Writers would express to us, "the most complete Character of spotless Virtue" they make use of this very Metaphor of being *cloathed with Righteousness*, not as with *filthy Rags*, but as with a *royal Robe*. This Form of Speech is used by the Prophet *Isaiah* 61 Chap. 10 ver. Where the *Robe* and not the *filthy Rags* of a good Man's Righteousness is compared to the Ornaments wherewith a *Bridegroom* decketh himself. And it is the very same Thing even universal Righteousness and Virtue that our Saviour means by the *Wedding Garment* which the Man in the Parable was destitute of when he came to the Marriage-Supper, and was therefore bound Hand and Foot and cast into outer Darknes.

16 *The Absurdity and Blasphemy*

Darkness. And finally; in pursuance of the same Metaphor; it is worthy of special Remark St. John in the 19 *Rev.* 8 *ver.* expressly calls the *personal* Righteousness of the Saints, *clean, white and fine Linnen.* So utterly unacquainted are the Scriptures with this modern Style of *filthy Rags*, as applied to the Virtues of good Men, that on the contrary as we see, and shall be more convinced, the more we search the sacred Writings, they constantly speak of them under the high recommending Character, *of a Robe of State, a Wedding Garment*; and in a Word, the richest and best Attire, that Men of the highest Rank, and upon the grandest Occasions can put on.

ANOTHER Argument against our thinking or speaking thus diminutively of the Righteousness of good Men, is the horrid Reflection that this directly casts on all the moral Perfections of the Deity, whose Image they wear and that on this very Account that they are righteous holy Men. It is the immutable Rule of right Action that God himself inviolably adheres to in all his Dispensations. *He is righteous in all his Ways and holy in all his Works.* And this is the highest Character and greatest Felicity of all his rational Creatures to resemble him in these divine Excellencies. Every good Man is said to have put on the new Nature of right Action, and true Holiness after the Image of God. And shall we call *this* Righteousness (the same for Kind as the Righteousness of God himself, and which in that infinite Perfection he enjoys it, is properly speaking the Beauty of the divine Nature :) which renders us like to God and stamps his lovely Image on

on our Souls ; I say, shall we disparage this in the World by giving it the odious Name of *filthy Rags*? We may hereby indeed make a false Shew of Humility, and recommend our selves to the unthinking Part of Mankind, but the Sober, and the Sensible, who can never receive any Thing for Truth only because 'tis spoken with an Air of Assurance and *Godly Tone* ; who consider with themselves, what the Righteousness of the Saints is.----These I say, whenever they hear personal Virtue and moral Goodness thus run down, tho' it should be done by the *highest* Priest on Earth, will certainly be apt to think, whatever they may say, *Master* in thus speaking, ye reproach God also. Nor can this in Reason be thought a common Reflection on the Divine Being, because 'tis blaspheming of him in his dearest Attributes, and denying him the chief Glories of his Nature.

To this I would add ; that it reflects equal Dishonour on Jesus Christ the Son of God, and on the whole Christian Scheme which he came to set up in the World. Our Saviour was the great Preacher of Righteousness : For this End was he born, and on this grand Design came he into the World, to propagate Truth and Vertue among Mankind. It is this and only this Righteousness (which some are pleased to style *filthy Rags*) which he preaches up thro' the Whole of that divine Sermon on the Mount ; which contains the Sum and Substance of his whole Doctrine, or surely he would have never made that Application of his Discourse in the 7th. *Matth.* 24. &c. *Therefore*
C *who soever*

18 *The Absurdity and Blasphemy*

whoſoever beareth theſe Sayings of mine and doth them, I will liken him to a wiſe Man that built his Houſe on a Rock, &c. In his Life and Practice he fulfilled all Righteouſneſs, not to excuſe us from, but to ſet us an Example of doing likewise. Now is that which the Son of God thought worth his coming down from Heaven to eſtabliſh on Earth, that which is the Baſis and in ſhort the whole Superſtructure of this his divine Religion : To recommend which to Mankind, he both lived and preached it up, and ſealed the Truth of his Doctrine with his moſt precious Blood, ſhall we call this I ſay, *filthy Rags* ? God forbid ! God forbid ! Such a Thought ſhould ever enter our Hearts : And if thro' the Wickedneſs of them it ſhould happen to ſteal in, let us look upon it as a greater Evil and be more ſollicitous to caſt it out than if we were poſſeſſed with ſeven Devils.

In the next Place, if we view the Righteouſneſſes or Vertues of *real* good Men in another Light, viz. as the Fruits of the holy Spirit of God, it will appear to be equally impious and abſurd, to call them *filthy Rags*. As it is a plain Dictate of Nature that the Maker is the Lover of Mankind, and ready to aſſiſt them all, in all proper Methods ſuitable to their Make, and conſiſtant with his moral Government in the Attainment of that Rectitude of Mind which muſt lay the Foundation of all true Happineſs : And as the Scriptures every where ſpeak of a gracious Influence that the Spirit of God has upon every well diſpoſed Mind in forming it to the ſame Image ; ſo the Effects
of

of his Operations which we sometimes call the Graces, and sometimes the Fruits of the Spirit are nothing else in the Language of Scripture (and properly speaking) but moral Virtues. The very same Things (O shocking Thought!) that are commonly styled *filthy Rags*. This you will soon see to be the exact Truth of the Case if you will please to consult the 5th Chap. of St. Paul's Epistle to the *Galatians*, where he treats professedly on this Subject, and gives us a particular Account of the Fruits of the Spirit, see the 22d. and 23d. Verses. *The Fruit of the Spirit is Love, Joy, Peace, Long-Suffering, Gentleness, Goodness, Faith, (i. e. Fidelity, Probity and Constancy.) Meekness, Temperance; against such there is no Law.* The same Account he gives 5th. Eph. 9th. Verse. *The Fruit of the Spirit is all Righteousness, Goodness and Truth.*

Now if these same Virtues that constitute the Righteousness of a good Man, and are spoken of in other Places of Scripture; (notwithstanding the concurring Influence of the Spirit of God, in the Product of them) as *his* Righteousness, are also the Fruits of, and consequently of the same Nature with the Spirit that produces them; shall we not stand amazed to think with what open Contempt they are treated by a great Part of the christian World? And that as we may commonly observe, under the highest Pretences to the Spirit; which certainly very much aggravates the Case, as it makes the Spirit the Author of those Reproaches they cast on his Fruits and Graces. Blaspheming the mi-
C 2
raculous

20 *The Absurdity and Blasphemy*

raculous Powers of the holy Ghost, was formerly called an unpardonable Sin; nor can any Reason be given (if it be done with equal Light and Malice) why Reproaching his Fruits and Virtues should be deemed less heinous or meet with a less fatal Doom.

To proceed; We needs must have an higher Opinion of the Virtues of good Men, than that of *filthy Rags*, if we consider the high Account God makes of them; the vast Use and Importance of them with Respect to ourselves. It is the Righteousness of the Saints that renders them amiable in God's Sight, that is the Condition of all his Favours to them, and the sole Rule he will proceed by in judging of them; and dispensing eternal Rewards to them. The Scriptures joyn with the natural Notions of our own Minds, in affirming all this in the most plain express Language imaginable. *Psalms 11. 7. The righteous Lord loveth Righteousness, and his Countenance doth behold the Upright. 15 Psalm Beg. Lord who shall abide in thy Tabernacle, who shall dwell in thy holy Hill? He that walketh uprightly, and worketh Righteousness, and speaketh the Truth in his Heart. Psalm 18. 23. &c.---I also was upright before him, and I kept my self from mine Iniquity. THEREFORE hath the Lord rewarded me according to my Righteousness, according to the Cleaness of my Hands, in his Eye-sight. With the Merciful thou wilt shew thy self merciful; with an upright Man thou wilt shew thy self upright: With the pure thou wilt shew thy self pure, &c.---*

RIGHTEOUSNESS

RIGHTEOUSNESS, the wise Man says, tendeth to Life. This is the natural Effect and Product of it. The Work of Righteousness is Peace and Quietness here, and the Consequence of it eternal Happiness hereafter. Of this Use and Importance is the Righteousness of a good Man with Respect to himself, and without it he never could be happy in himself; nor so well on't in Heaven as on Earth, tho' he had the Righteousness of every other Being in the Universe imputed to him. For 'tis demonstration; that the Foundation of final Happiness must be laid in every ones own Mind, in a personal good Turn and Rightness of Temper, to relish celestial Joys.

BESIDES these personal and private, temporal, spiritual and eternal good Effects of this Righteousness; we are assured not only from the sacred Scriptures, but can demonstrate from the Nature and Reason of Things, that it is of the last Importance with Respect to the Prosperity & Happiness of Society, & that the general Good of all Mankind essentially depends upon it. It is this Righteousness (the *personal* Righteousness of the Saints) that Solomon says, *exalteth a Nation*: It secures the Persons, and establishes the Thrones of Princes. It animates the Obedience, and draws a sacred Enclosure around the Rights of Subjects. It stops the Course of divine Judgments against a People, and opens all the Stores of Heaven to supply them with Good. And in short, both by a natural and moral Tendency, secures the Felicity of all Societies, and if universally practised, would infallibly diffuse

22 *The Absurdity and Blasphemy*

diffuse a proportionable Degree of Happiness over the whole Globe.

AFTER all that has been said of the Nature, Use, and Importance of true Righteousness, considered as the Image of God, the Substance of Christianity, the Product of the Spirit, the Ornament of great Price in the Sight of God, of particular and universal Influence on humane Happiness, in their present, and in their future eternal State. After all these recommending Characters (I say) of a truly good Man's own personal Righteousness, it would be too great a Reflection on your Understanding, to suppose there is one Man that does not see the Injustice and Wickedness, the Impiety and Blasphemy of calling *this* Righteousness *filthy Rags*. And so I come,

III^dly, and lastly ; To point out to you some of the dangerous Consequences of admitting this Sense of the Text. And 1st. Thus to deprectate the moral Vertues of true Christians, tends to prejudice the most Sensible against the Christian Profession, and confirm Men in their Infidelity.

THE most rational and divine Scheme of Religion may become despicable in the Eyes of the World, by Misrepresentations. Even *Christianity* itself, tho' capable of a rational Defence, well attested by external Evidence, and when viewed in it's native Purity and Simplicity, void of all corrupt Glosses and human Additions, carrying in it the clearest internal Marks of it's divine Original ;
even

even this Religion, I say, may be so represented, as to render it ridiculous in the Opinion of sensible thinking Men. For with what Air of Infallibility soever Men may vent the Fictions of their own weak or disordered Brains for the Doctrines and Precepts of the Gospel; and tho' the greatest Absurdities, the most palpable Nonsense; in Times of Ignorance and implicit Faith may be winked at; tho' the unthinking Multitude may be best pleased with that they understand least, and be carried away into any Scheme, that generously allows them the Practice of their Vices, tho' every Article be a downright Affront to common Sense; yea, by a few rabble charming Sounds be converted into such fiery Bigots, as to be ready to die in the Defence of Stupidity and Nonsense, as well as to kill (and that purely for the Glory of God) all that are so *heretical* and *graceless* as not to renounce their Reason in Complaisance to their sovereign Dictates; notwithstanding all this, I say; There always was and always will be some in the World (alas that their Number is so few) that have Sense eno' and dare trust their own Faculties so far, as to *judge in themselves what is right*. That by no Arts, how sanctimonious soever, can ever be bro't to believe, (and much less profess when they don't believe) Things repugnant to the first Principles of Reason. And therefore are naturally led to conclude, That no Scheme can be right, no Doctrine from God that abates the Motives of Vertue, or discourages the Practice of any one Duty. For the Existence of God is not more certain than this; That it must be the grand Design, the ultimate

24 *The Absurdity and Blasphemy*

timate View of God, in all his Dispensations, to promote the moral Rectitude and Happiness of his Creatures. And exactly in Proportion to it's Tendency this Way arises the true intrinsic Value of every Revelation he gives us. But if this be *Revelation* and *Grace*, to vilify human Nature, and disparage all our Improvements in those divine Vertues wherein essentially consists all our Glory and Felicity; If the Scriptures are used to affront human Reason, and debauch Men's Manners, and the most glorious Dispensation of the Gospel in particular, instead of teaching us to deny Ungodliness, and every worldly Lust, and to live soberly righteously, charitably and devoutly in this present World, be conceived of only as a Scheme calculated to allow Men the Practice of their Vices here, with Impunity hereafter; If this be the Liberty and peculiar Privilege of the Saints to be discharged from their Obligations to obey their Master, and they that break his Commandments, stand fairer for his *Grace*, than they, who conscientiously keep them, for fear they should trust to what they do; so far, I say, as any take their Conceptions from such Corruptions of Christianity, they must necessarily be prejudiced against it.---Thunder we ever so loud, without any previous *Lightning*, HE THAT BELIEVETH NOT SHALL BE DAMNED, it will signify nothing, for they will be DAMNED before they will believe. *2dly.* The loading of moral Vertue with such opprobrious Terms, has a natural Tendency to encourage and harden wicked Men in their Vices. What can tend more to dispirit Men's Endeavours after Purity of Heart and Sanctity

Sanctity of Manners, to stop their Mouths from ever putting up one Petition to Heaven for Assistance in carrying on the Work of Righteousness in them, than thus to asperse moral Vertue, as nothing worth in the Sight of God, no more than *filthy Rags*! It is evident to common Sense, that this must lead Men into an utter Contempt of those Things that are of infinite Importance for them to esteem and practice. Surely Men will never take much Pains for that, which will be of no Service to them when they have got it. To speak freely, I confess I never yet saw with what Face a Man can pretend to exhort others to the Practice of Righteousness, who is constantly telling them, perhaps in the same Breath, that *all their Righteousness*, when they have obtained it, will be nothing but *filthy Rags*. "God is already satisfied in all his Demands, his Law, his Honour, his rigorous relentless Justice are all satisfied, and there is nothing left for Man to do" but to believe this undoubtingly, and the more surely, the less Grounds he has for it, to rely upon it, that he is righteous, and shall finally be accepted as such, tho' every Reflection he passes on himself is a standing Demonstration that he is *not* righteous, and his own Reason assures him, that no Being who understands his Character can look upon him any otherwise than what he is.

"THE Believer indeed may if he please, out of meer Generosity, add Works of Righteousness of his own", but there is no real Need of it; for his main Interest is secure without it". He is
D already

26 *The Absurdity and Blasphemy*

already in such a State of Salvation, as that his final Happiness is as certain as if he was now in the actual Possession of it. The plain Truth of the Case is this; Either our Righteousness is of some Use and Significancy in the Affair of our Salvation, or it is not. Either it has some Connection with, and actual Influence on our Happiness, or it is of no real Necessity as to us. If the Latter, then there is not one Word to be said in favour of it, but the greatest Advocates for Licentiousness may be the best Friends to Christianity, and the most Vicious the highest in the Grace of God. But if the Former, then 'tis a sure Thing, that in Proportion to it's real Worth, and final Advantage, arises the Folly of those who neglect it, and the Strength of all our Arguments to recommend it to Mankind.

3dly, and lastly; The Consequences of depreciating moral Vertue are very injurious to such as are sincere upright Christians; in robbing of them of that divine Comfort they are the proper Heirs of, and filling their Minds with needless Fears and Scruples about their spiritual State.

THE great Rule the Scriptures lay down for Men to go by in passing Judgment on their spiritual State, is the sincere, upright, steady and universal Practice of Vertue. This they speak of as the only sure Rule, to which all others are reducible, as what we may with Confidence rely on, and ought to adhere to, in Opposition to all other
delusive

delusive Marks whatever. *I John 3. 7. Let no Man deceive you: He that doth Righteousness, is righteous. Ver. 10. In this the Children of God are manifest, and the Children of the Devil: Whosoever doth not Righteousness, is not of God.*

BUT now if we are perswaded to think that all our Righteousnesses, when we are become sincere good Men are nothing but *filthy Rags*, we are naturally led to seek for some other Evidence of our good State, than what results from our Goodness; and it being impossible to find any other to be relied on, for the Scriptures propose none but this, it necessarily follows that we must either be filled with vain Hopes and empty Joys, or else after all our vertuous Attainments we must be subjected to all the Horrors we can suppose the most vicious of Men to be exercised with. We must fear where no Fear is; And in a Word, put the Matter in the most favourable Light, we must walk to Heaven on the confines of Hell, while our Path would be smooth and easy, our Prospect serene and bright, and we should anticipate future Enjoyments in our present Hopes, if we were but allowed to think (and that while all necessary Evidences are in our Favour) that our present Condition is safe.

THESE, to be brief, are the natural unfailing Consequences of thus depretiating the moral Virtues of good Men.-----It ministers to the Growth of Infidelity, and of Vice among professed Christians, and to the great Disquiet of sincere good

28 *The Absurdity and Blasphemy*

Christians, who are the proper Heirs of Comfort.
And thus I have finished what I at first proposed.

To conclude the whole Matter ; I expect by this Time, some are ready to break forth-----*Ab ! all this directly tends to build People up in their own Righteousness---Not one Word of Christ, nor the least Savour of true gospel soul-saving Preaching in all this Discourse.*

To the first Part of which Charge, I answer---- If by it's building People up in their *own* Righteousness, be meant, That it recommends Hypocrisy and counterfeit Vertue ; that it places Religion in any external Duties separate from a corresponding good Temper within (all which Sort of Righteousness would indeed, as to our final Acceptance with God, thro' the Mediation of Christ, be no better than *filthy Rags*) or, in short, in any Righteousness of our own contriving and not taught of God ; in any Thing but what the Bible, from the Beginning of *Genesis* to the End of *Revelations*, makes the Substance of our present Duty, and the Condition of our future Happiness ; If this, I say, be the Force of the present Objection, I have no other Answer to make, but to leave every one to judge for himself, how groundless it is.

BUT if by it's tending to build People up in their *own* Righteousness be designed, that it is any Ways calculated to encourage *personal* Goodness, and promote the Practice of moral and christian Vertue in the World ; the least Tendency it has
this

this Way, I shall heartily rejoice in, and instead of being solicitous to prove the Objection groundless, my greatest Concern, upon a Review of the preceeding Discourse, is really this, that there is not *more* Ground for it; and that so good a Design is so poorly served.

IN the next Place; As to its not being *preaching of Christ*; the Difficulty, perhaps will entirely vanish when we come to adjust our Notions of the Thing. "TO PREACH CHRIST (says a ~~the~~ very elegant Writer) is universally acknowledged to be the Duty of every Christian Minister. But what doth it mean? It is not to use his Name as a Charm to work up our Hearers to a warm Pitch of Enthusiasm; without any Foundation of Reason to support it.---'Tis not to encourage undue and presumptuous Reliance on his Merits and Intercession, to the contempt of Virtue and good Works. No: But to represent him as a Law-giver as well as a Saviour, as a *Preacher of Righteousness*, as one who hath given us a most noble and compleat System of Morality, enforced by the most substantial and worthy Motives" (among which I may venture to mention as one of the most powerful, The Certainty of our Forgiveness of Sins, and final Acceptance with the Father, thro' the Merits of the Son) upon the Condition of Faith, Repentance and Good-living. In a Word; "To shew that the whole Scheme of our Redemption is a *Doctrine according to Godliness*.---And all those who decry moral Vertue, which is the supreme Dignity of God himself,

" and

x *M^r. Foster's Sermon. on Acts 24, 25.*

30 *The Absurdity and Blasphemy*

“ and inseparably connected with the Happiness
 “ of all rational Beings, as a Thing of no Avail to-
 “ wards obtaining the divine Favour, and the
 “ Privileges and Rewards of Christianity, do, in
 “ *Effect* (tho’ I am perswaded with a contrary
 “ Design, even to exalt, instead of diminishing
 “ the Honour of the Gospel) subvert the very
 “ fundamental Principles both of natural and re-
 “ vealed Religion”. Therefore, “ to explain and
 “ press the eternal Laws of Morality by all the
 “ peculiar Motives which the christian Religion
 “ suggests, and making all it’s Doctrines subservi-
 “ ent to Holiness, is beyond Comparison the most
 “ *useful* Way of preaching.” -----To preach up
 chiefly what Christ himself laid the chiefest Stress
 upon (and whether this was not *moral Vertue*,
 let every One judge from his Discourses) must cer-
 tainly, in the Opinion of all sober Men, be called
 truly and properly, and in the best Sense, *preach-
 ing of Christ*.

AFTER all ; tho’ this Sort of Preaching is evi-
 dently conformable, both to the Design of the
 Gospel, and the Example of our Saviour, yet I am
 sensible ’tis not calculated for the general *Taste* of
 the present Age. *It is not to walk in the Way of
 their Heart, and in the Sight of their Eyes.* It
 may not, at present, be the Way to *popular* Ap-
 plause, nor to *priestly* Favours. However, if it be
 the Way of Truth (and I hope this is no certain
 Evidence that it is not) the Way, I say, of Truth,
 of Honesty and Integrity, we are sure it is the
 Way that will endure forever. And while this As-
 surance

rance is fixed in a Man's Mind, tho' the asserting of it should expose him to Poverty and Contempt, and, in short, all Manner of temporal Inconveniences, a stedfast Faith and inflexible Vertue will readily reply---*None of these Things move me, neither count I my Life dear unto me, if so be I may finish my Course with Joy, and the Ministry which I have received of the Lord, to testify the Gospel of his Grace.* And both these truly great and infinitely important Ends, will infallibly be secured, if we not only in Doctrine, but in Practice, inviolably Adhere to that pertinent Advice of St. Paul's to his beloved Son according to the common Faith, *Titus 3. 8. This is a faithful Saying, and these Things I will that thou affirm constantly, that they which have believed in God, be careful to maintain good Works.* THESE Things are GOOD, and PROFITABLE unto Men.

F I N I S.



